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(MAJ NICHOLLS)

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SUBJECT: Media Reaction: Prophet's Cartoon; Dhaka

Summary: "The Daily Star" op-eds say that the firestorm that has erupted around the publication of the by now notorious twelve cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad is in its own way a perfect encapsulation of what Tariq Ali has presciently called "the clash of fundamentalisms" and demonstrates with frightening clarity the extent to which the space for non-fundamentalist Muslims to be seen and heard has been severely constricted by the parameters of the current discourse of the "war on terror."

Prophet's Cartoon

"Caught In The Crossfire Of The Clash Of Fundamentalisms"

Independent English language "The Daily Star" op-ed article comments (02/17/06):

The firestorm that has erupted around the publication of the by now notorious twelve cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad is in its own way a perfect encapsulation of what Tariq Ali has presciently called "the clash of fundamentalisms" and demonstrates with frightening clarity the extent to which the space for non-fundamentalist Muslims to be seen and heard has been severely constricted by the parameters of the current discourse of the "war on terror."

On one side of the clash, we have the elements in the West that are hostile to Islam as a religion and culture, and believe that the world is currently enmeshed in a Samuel Huntington-style "clash of civilizations" between the Western world and the Islamic world, in which there can be no compromise and no conciliation, and from which only one side can emerge victorious.

On the other side, we have the Muslim fundamentalists who are eager to portray the entire Western world as the enemies of Islam and those Muslims who do not sign up for the fundamentalist program as insufficiently pious defenders of the faith.

In this context, the furor surrounding the cartoons can be seen as merely the newest front in the clash of fundamentalisms that threatens to one day damage beyond repair relations between Islam and the west.

The war within the West is between those who wish to engage with the Islamic world on the one hand, and those who believe that Islam is a religion and culture that represents an assault on Western civilization that must be confronted both ideologically and militarily on the other. Commentators and politicians in the west have seized on the riots that have taken place to protest the cartoons to make their point that Islam is incompatible with western conceptions of democracy and tolerance. The fact that there has been a strong political component to the protests that have been orchestrated and the relatively small number of those who have protested violently is conveniently brushed aside.

In the Muslim world, the cartoon issue has been manipulated by those who either want to burnish their own religious credentials to protect their right flank from the fundamentalists (see, e.g., Egypt, government of) or those who wish to whip up a furor against governments and policies that they deem to be too pro-western and thus move the political spectrum rightwards.

In Bangladesh we have not seen violent protests and that is to our credit. There has been almost universal condemnation of the cartoons, but whatever protests have been registered have been peaceful enough. Last Friday, the Danish embassy was well protected by sensible law enforcement precautions, and as best as I can tell, Danes in Bangladesh are perfectly free to go about their business without fear. The clash of fundamentalisms is a long-term problem for

non-fundamentalists in Bangladesh, and it seems likely that the immediate future will be marked by further escalations by fundamentalists on either side, and this will have the effect of backing non-fundamentalists even further into a corner.

New images of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib have just surfaced as well as images of abuse of civilians by British troops in Iraq. In the war for the hearts and minds of the Muslim world, none of this helps much.

"Cartoons animated outrage?
Independent English language "The Daily Star" op-ed article
comments (02/17/06):

If I am allowed to draw upon my scant knowledge of economics, I would say the recent controversy over the 12 cartoons, which appeared in the Danish daily Jyllands-Posten in September 2005, is a matter of elasticity. We the Muslims are highly reflex elastic, which means we are long on sensitivity to give reactions, while they the Danes are resolve inelastic because they are short on sensibility to take decisions. If the apology they are giving now were given then, the fury which has been sparking violent protests across the Muslim countries could have been easily avoided.

This is where the high-minded intellectual from a highly evolved society proved utterly naive or downright stupid. If it's the Danish tradition to satire everyone, it's the Muslim tradition not to draw the likeness or graven images of their prophet, let alone do his caricature. Why then should the Danes show disrespect to the Prophet of Islam? The red herring of the whole controversy has been the freedom of expression, which the Danish paper claims gave it the right to do what it did. But does it mean one is free to express anything? Are people allowed to streak on the streets of Copenhagen? Is it common in the public domain of Denmark to curse each other's mothers? No offense, I am just curious to know how far the freedom of expression can be stretched so that the holiest man of a religion can be gratuitously ridiculed in defiance of the sentiments of his followers.

One must be honourable in one's exercise of freedom, and it demands that we don't say that a fat lady is fat, an ugly man is ugly, or a handicapped person is handicapped. Freedom is like breathing in the fresh air without denying others the right to do the same. Freedom is about tolerance and respect. When it comes to newspapers, the freedom of expression ought to meet the standards of accuracy, clarity, fairness, and taste.

This is where the Danes have stumbled. Journalism is as much about courage as it is about good taste. The cartoons have been done in bad taste and I hope someday the Danish people will appreciate that freedom of expression doesn't mean to rub it in the nose of someone so that he feels offended. It's for the same reason why we don't use the "F" word in public or talk obscenities before children or elders. In the US, the word "nigger" is not used because it would hurt the sensibilities of African-Americans.

Even in advanced societies, unbridled mouth brings outrage. In the past week, The Washington Post has been bitterly criticized for publishing an op-ed piece by a leader of the terrorist group Hamas. The Post has also taken flack for a Tom Toles cartoon, which appeared on January 29, criticizing Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. The cartoon showed a quadruple amputee in a hospital bed, which brought a flood of protests, including a letter signed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, accusing the paper of mocking military amputees. Some of the speakers, including a former US President, are being excoriated for their inept comments made at the funeral of Coretta Scott King, the widow of Dr. Martin Luther King.

Flemming Rose has recently said that his paper would publish a full page of cartoons satirizing Jesus and the Israel-Palestinian conflict to prove that it's not one-sided. Once again Flemming is showing his incorrigible capacity to miss the point. Two wrongs don't make a right. Besides, if he rips another man's clothes, it's an insult. If he rips his own clothes, it is madness, but not the same thing.

The Danish newspaper and other western newspapers, which reprinted the cartoons to show solidarity to it, must realize that their madness makes it difficult for the moderate Muslims who are trying to have a sobering effect on their extremist co-religionists. Coming back to economics, it's Gresham's Law equivalent of sense and sensibility. Bad sense is increasingly driving good sense out of our minds.

